TESTIMONY November 06, 1997 JOE LIEBERMAN SENATOR HOUSE SCIENCE ENERGY AND ENVIRONMENT THE ADMINISTRATION'S GLOBAL CLIMATE CHANGE PROPOSAL

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THE CHILLING PROSPECT OF GLOBAL WARMING

Statement of Senator Joseph L Lieberman (CT)

before the

Subcommittee on Energy & Environment

Committee on Science

U.S. House of Representatives

Global warming is not a malicious myth. Climate change is not a product of the imagination. Even the most basic scientific research, let alone common sense, tells us that our atmosphere has been and continues to be affected by the byproducts of the Industrial Age. The questions we face include determining the extent of the damage, what to do about it, and how not to make matters worse.

One step I believe we must take is to invest in a simple insurance policy. This is why I fully support President Clinton's efforts to reduce greenhouse gas emissions worldwide and to do so through a balanced and enforceable global treaty. I do so as a pro-growth Democrat who believes that new technologies and international trade are essential for the well-being of the American economy and the American people in the next century.

An international treaty designed to reduce the threat of global warming is not in conflict with our economic goals, as some have suggested. In fact, I see environmental protection and prevention working in concert with our economy, enabling growth as we cultivate the health of our planet and our people.

I also believe that when and if the key elements of the President's proposals are adopted at the world climate conference in Kyoto, Japan next month, the United States will have done itself a great service. We will have helped solve a growing threat to the world's physical environment and done so without disrupting the American economy in the process. We will have created a balanced protocol invested in the science we know today and outlined the beginnings of a flexible, long-term strategy that will benefit our children and our grandchildren.

The debate about climate change is too often vested -- and I believe wrongly so -- in false choices between scientific findings, common sense, business investments, and environmental awareness. None of these considerations exist in a vacuum apart from the others -- and this is no different from the mixture of oxygen,

nitrogen and trace elements in our atmosphere. Our atmosphere is a complex structure, just like our society. There are checks and balances -- and breaking points.

A decade of research and debate has now led to a solid consensus on the science of climate change. We are not at a breaking point in our atmosphere -- yet. But one message I'd like to convey here this morning is that science now tells us that there is a breaking point -- and one which we dare not approach.

More than 2,500 of the world's best scientific and technical experts have linked the increase of greenhouse gases to at least some of the increases in sea level, temperature, and rainfall experienced worldwide in this century.

No one is saying that there will be an end to the four seasons or that our oceans are about to start boiling. But we also must admit that we have been warned about the enormous power of humanity to affect our environment. We can either respect our surroundings and work in concert with nature, or we can pollute at our peril.

Beyond the science we know, our own common sense tells us that the risks associated with climate change are serious. Weather-related disasters now cost our economy billions of dollars. Newspaper headlines have brought that reality home repeatedly in recent years.

Scientific projections now tell us that the frequency and severity of future droughts, floods, water scarcity, sea level rise, and infectious diseases could occur more often in the years ahead unless we, first, encourage the free-market to invest in a new generation of energy-efficient technologies and, second, make changes in law that will make those goals binding over time in our national interest.

This balance has successful precedent in the United States. Laws we enacted a generation ago -- and the technologies those laws inspired -- have led to an American economy which simultaneously supports a cleaner environment and greater business opportunities.

But unlike such successful environmental laws as the Clean Water and Clean Air acts, climate change cannot be addressed within the confines of our borders alone. That is why we need an international treaty which protects American interests, creates incentives both at home and abroad, and develops a regime of meaningful requirements phased in over time.

We now know that the voluntary agreement at Rio in 1992 will not be enough to ensure that the developed nations of the world will return to 1990 emissions levels by the year 2000. Germany and the United Kingdom will meet the goals, by more by coincidence than directive. Other nations will fail to meet the targets completely. The United States will be one of those. And since the United States is the world's largest producer of greenhouse gases, and since we will be 13 percent above the 1990 target, we have more than just work cut out for us. We will have the eyes of the world watching us for our leadership, or lack of it.

Knowing these are the problems we will face, we are then left with the question of what to do about it. Doing nothing is not a viable option. Doing nothing would be a cavalier experiment with the air we breathe, the water we drink, and the fragile balance of temperatures that support the Earth's human, animal and plant life.

The President has proposed another course, a course of action: a gradual, worldwide, and legally-binding approach to confront the threats of climate change. That approach will allow us to learn over time how to manage emissions reductions in a balanced way and protect the full measure of our domestic and international interests.

We should think of this plan as a worldwide stop sign -- or perhaps as a way to stop putting our environmental future onto a credit card which we pretend has no credit limit and then hope that when the bill comes due we have enough money in the bank to pay it off.

We used to do that with our annual Federal budget deficit. The American people demanded that we change that particular practice, just as I believe the American people favor investing in environmental innovations today that will benefit their children tomorrow.

And this is why the President's approach makes sense. The plan includes regular oversight; a period of voluntary action; a modest $5 billion program of tax cuts and increased research and development funding; and rewards businesses that make investments before they are required. The first 10 years of the plan would be focused on gaining practical experience before anyone would need to meet binding targets. In fact, the President has proposed to reduce emissions to 1990 levels somewhere between 2008 and 2012, with further reductions after that.

Let me discuss why I believe the President's plan will work.

First, no climate change strategy has a strong likelihood of success without major advances in energy technology and conservation. Those advances would offer us the best opportunities to achieve our climate objectives through significant economic savings, and here we have the experience of history to steel that assessment. For example, a $3 million dollar investment made in the late 1970s by the Federal government to help develop more energy efficient windows has already saved American consumers and businesses more than $1 billion in lower energy bills.

The President's plan will spur the development of new technologies and allow the power of the marketplace to develop and produce lower-cost, longer-term innovations that will provide our economy with a much smoother and more inexpensive transition. One way to make that dynamic even more attractive to business would be to allow businesses to earn emission reduction credits today, before the targets become binding, and allow that bank to he used against future compliance standards.

This is a key element of the President's proposal. Everyone would win. Business could be assured that they wouldn't have to invest massive amounts of capital at the spur of a future moment. Our environment would win because we would have made the investments we needed before we approached a crisis.

Another reason the President's plan is good for America is that it will explode the myth that a binding climate agreement will prove prohibitively expensive. The National Academy of Sciences reported in 1991 that "the United States could reduce its greenhouse gas emissions by between 10 and 40 percent of the 1990 level at very low cost." Five national laboratories reported just last month that "national investment in energy-efficiency and clean energy technologies can reduce U.S. emissions of global warming gases and produce energy savings that roughly equal to or exceed costs to implement them."

Were there a lack of flexibility in the President's plan, I, too, would be concerned about the expense. But the Administration recognizes that we are in a new age, one which I call Environmental Innovation. In this new age we must focus on greater results, not greater regimentation. The President has made flexibility an absolute prerequisite for any global climate agreement, and I certainly agree that this is the right approach.

For example, and again from the annals of experience, the acid rain program of the Clean Air Act has demonstrated that flexible and market-based approaches like emissions trading -- a major component of the President's proposal -- will lower the costs of climate protection beyond those predicted currently. Our General Accounting Office estimates that the sulfur dioxide trading program alone has saved $2 to $3 billion over traditional command-and-control approaches.

Finally, some have suggested that any agreement in Kyoto next month will be fatally flawed because developing countries will not be asked to take on the same obligations as industrialized nations. This is yet another myth. The President has said that the United States will not take on the burdens of binding commitments without meaningful participation by developing countries. That's a commitment I take very seriously.

And this is a final point we all must remember. Global warming and climate change are not fancy phrases in search of real-world consequence. The consequences of atmospheric changes on Earth from sun spot activity, El Nino, and the gravitational forces of the Moon are hardly in dispute. Science has documented their existence and their effects. So, too, is science documenting the effects of greenhouse gas emissions on our atmosphere.

But there is an important distinction to be made. Unlike those forces of nature which we can't control, these are byproducts of humanity that we can influence if not control in our own self interest. The question is whether we will.

The President's plan offers a balanced series of first steps to do so and to guard against any unnatural and avoidable climate changes in America's future. It is a very modest and wise investment, and one which we cannot afford to miss.

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